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A Look at the Life of Theodore Parker

Discourse by

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A LOOK AT THE LIFE OF THEODORE PARKER.

"What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet."—MATT. xi. 7–9.

WE have, during the last week, heard of the death of Theodore Parker,—a noble soul, known well, honored, and loved by most of us. I cannot let this day pass by without taking occasion to say a few words, however incomplete and inadequate, in memory of his worth. And, in speaking of him, I hope to avoid all extravagance of eulogy, all indiscriminate praise, all sweeping generalities of statement. As he to others, so I to him. He once refused to accept the established rule of necrology, *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*,—"Say nothing but *good* of the dead"; and substituted for it this other and better rule, *De mortuis nil nisi verum*,—"Say nothing but *truth* of the dead." "It is no merit," added he, "to die. Why praise a man because he is dead?" I will remember this honesty, brother, in speaking of thee.

Theodore Parker was the ripe fruit of New England; baptized in the Lexington meeting-house; learning his letters in the primary school; taking strength from the granite and gravel below and from the cold winter winds above; learning freedom of utterance at town-meeting; inheriting strong sense, clear logic, and penetrating in-

sight in his ancestral blood; of the stock of the Puritans; of the tribe of Massachusetts; a Yankee of the Yankees; a Unitarian also, by inheritance from plain-thinking parents; and as touching all youthful habits of behavior, all moral requisitions of a strict community, blameless. No man more than he, since Benjamin Franklin, has shown those traits of common sense joined with abstract speculation, sensibility of conscience poised with calm judgment, the fanatic's devotion to ideas with the thoughtful prudence of the man of the world, which makes the basis of New England character and its essential strength.

When, on the 19th of April, 1775, the British troops marched to Lexington and Concord, they found at Lexington the militia company of that town—eighty strong—drawn up on the green, in front of the meeting-house, to receive them. The captain of the company waited till the British troops—eight hundred in all—had reached the green and deployed into line opposite, and till their commander had ordered the Americans to disperse. Then he, too, gave the same order to his men, not wishing to sacrifice life in a useless resistance to overwhelming numbers, but letting the British soldiers, for the first time, look in the face of the American militia. But, while they were dispersing, the British fired; and that greensward on the April morning was stained with the first American blood which fell in the great struggle. Out in Kentucky the hunters heard it, and baptized their newly planted town by the name of Lexington. In Europe the nations heard it, and dated from that hour the beginning of a new era for the destinies of man. The captain of that militia company was John Parker, grandfather of our Theodore,

and his gun was kept by Theodore in his study, to be used, if necessary, in protecting the fugitive slave under his roof against the Regulars and Tories of our day, who are ready as ever to trample on the rights of the individual in the supposed interest of order and good government.

Born thus, amid New England life, in a farmer's home; driving the cows to the field and going to the district school; listening to sermons and to discussions in town-meeting; studying his Latin grammar by the light of the kitchen fire; hardening his body and soul with stern manual labor and training his intellect by the wholesome studies of the common schools,—the genius of Theodore Parker took its flight upward, from its humble nest in the meadow-grass to its singing-place among the stars. It is an honor to our institutions when they train up their boys into such men as he.

Was he a great man? Let us examine that point. There is a double danger here of error,—danger of not noticing the greatness close to us, because it is so near,—as people walking at the foot of Antwerp minster cannot measure the height of its spire; and the danger of exaggerating, in our enthusiasm, qualities of a merely transient splendor into a permanent radiance, as the bright light in a window near by may be mistaken for a distant star. What, then, makes true greatness? and did he possess it?

There is no real greatness where we do not find in a man the three elemental tendencies of Intellect, Heart, and Will, all in full and harmonious activity. Either of them alone cannot constitute greatness. We see, among practical men, some of immense energy, who sweep everything before them by their resistless will; but they are

not *great* men, for their energy is not directed by any great thought and not inspired by any generous love. And there are also men of great intellectual powers, but without any energetic purpose, any clear aim, whose knowledge tends nowhere. Like gold locked up in a miser's iron chest, their intellectual powers and treasures profit no one and are useless. And so there may be love,—saintly love to God, humane love to man; but, because not illuminated by insight nor directed by energetic purpose, it stagnates into a merely sentimental piety, a sentimental philanthropy.

I. Theodore Parker's INTELLECT was remarkable for its varied faculties. It was strong in analysis and synthesis, in marshalling a multitude of facts, and in ascending from facts to comprehensive laws. His memory of details was astonishing; but his power of systematizing those details—making them drill in companies and march in squadrons and take on the order of battle—was equally striking. His mind was strong in its perceptions and apprehensions, very able to seize and retain individual facts. In his childhood he could repeat whole cantos of poetry and learn by heart a poem of five hundred lines at a reading. Before he was ten years old, he had studied botany so as to know all the shrubs and trees of Massachusetts and the names and habits of the plants in his vicinity. At ten he began Latin, at eleven, Greek. At twenty-one he had read Virgil twenty times, Horace nearly as often, besides having made himself master of chemistry, natural philosophy, astronomy, and mathematics. Presently he added French, Latin, Italian, Spanish, and German, and afterward Hebrew.

But the main character of his knowledge was that it was *live* knowledge. There are some men who accumulate facts as ants gather grains. They are merely the collectors of dry seeds, which never germinate. They are the slaves of their knowledge, not its masters. There are great scholars who never knew what to do with their accumulated stores. Not so with our friend. His mind was not like a forest in winter, when the trees stand close above and the bushes thick below, but where the icy branches rattle together while the cold wind roars through their tops. It was like the same forest when the summer sun has poured life into every part, and the myriad buds and leaves expand, when the blossoms open, the birds and insects flit through the tender foliage, and a soft perfume comes mingled from a thousand thousand flowers.

Theodore Parker was possessed of a power of acquisition, which few men, out of Germany, ever had. He knew the contents of all the books in his library. He could take the substance out of a book in an incredibly short time. On that fatal winter which broke down his constitution and determined his fate (the winter which killed him) he was in the habit of filling a carpet-bag with works of tough philosophy and theology, in Greek, Latin, German, in old black-letter print and yellow parchment covers, and would study them Monday, while travelling in the cars, to lecture on Monday night; study them Tuesday, while travelling to lecture at another place on Tuesday night; and so on, studying all day and lecturing every night, till Friday. On Friday he would come home, write his Sunday's sermon on Saturday forenoon, visit the sick and suffering of his society on Saturday afternoon, preach Sunday morning

to two or three thousand persons, rest a little on Sunday afternoon, receive his friends on Sunday evening, and away again on Monday.

I asked him, "Do you read all your books, and do you know what is in them?" "I read them all," said he, "and can give you a table of contents for each book." During that winter he lectured to about eighty thousand persons, in every part of the Free States, from Maine to Wisconsin. When he came back from Germany, he had been to see the old theologian, Ferdinand Christian Baur of Tübingen, and had asked him how many hours a day he studied. The old man replied with a sigh, "Ach! leider, nur achtzehn,"—"Alas! only eighteen." Parker never studied eighteen hours a day, I suppose; but I think he put the twenty-four hours' study of common men into his six or twelve hours a day, for he who studies with an active mind will learn more in a few minutes than another, studying passively and idly, will gain in an hour. What Parker knew, he knew; and he knew that he knew it. All his knowledge lay at hand, accessible, like the tools of an orderly workman.

But the scholarship and knowledge of Theodore Parker made but the beginning of his intellectual work. He was an original thinker. Very early addicted to metaphysical pursuits, he never relinquished his taste for them. In philosophy he belonged to that school of thinkers who are called Transcendentalists; who believe that man, as God's child, receives an inheritance of ideas from within; that he knows by insight; that he has intuitions of truth, which furnish the highest evidence of the reality of the soul, of God, of duty, of immortality. He joined, not doubtfully,

but with most earnest conviction, that great company of ideal philosophers, at whose head stands the divine Plato, and in whose generous ranks are the chief intellects of the race,—Socrates and Pythagoras, Epictetus and Antoninus, Plotinus and Jamblichus, Erigena and Anselm, Descartes and Leibnitz, Cudworth and Henry More, Pascal and Kant, Cousin and Schleiermacher. But his chief powers he consecrated to theology which he justly regarded as the queen of all sciences. It has become the fashion with many, in these days, to undervalue both philosophy and theology, and to consider them as idle and empty studies, leading to no practical results; while the arts and sciences, natural philosophy, the knowledge of external things, social questions, humanities, philanthropies, and reforms are the only really solid and valuable studies. Not so thought Theodore Parker. He knew, as well as any, how empty is a great deal that is called theology, but he also knew that every man has, and must have, a philosophy and a theology. He knew that every man's philosophy underlies his theology, and that his theology underlies his practice. He knew that theological reform must precede all other reform; that, as one thinks of God and God's character, so will he form his own. He knew that, so long as God is regarded as partial, wilful, and revengeful, man will continue to be partial, wilful, and revengeful too.

Until our theology becomes Christian, we can have no Christian morality nor Christian ethics. Those who believe that God has foreordained some human souls to an eternal hell hereafter can very easily believe that he has ordained some human races to be slaves forever here.

Those who think that God is full of wrath against his enemies will consider it right themselves to be filled with wrath against theirs. Therefore, Theodore Parker drove the deep subsoil plough of a sound theology under the roots of a false morality and ethics. And, when I say a sound theology, I refer especially to his doctrine of God,—to THEOLOGY, strictly so called; for his views here were mostly noble and admirable. His CHRISTOLOGY, or doctrine of Christ, I have thought defective; and his ANTHROPOLOGY, or doctrine of man, somewhat defective, too, in important particulars. He ascribed too absolute moral power to the human will. He did not enough recognize the element of evil which comes to us from the solidarity of the race,—inherited from behind and caught by contagion from around. He regarded sin as always and strictly a self-originated disease, never as a contagious epidemic or as an inherited tendency. And all which to me seem his mistakes, theoretical and practical, had their root here.

There was also in the mind of Theodore Parker a poetic quality to which he never did justice. Imagination is too spontaneous a faculty to thrive in a brain which is driven forward in the direction of constant work by so energetic a will. In a letter just received from his friend, William Henry Channing, he writes: "Once I remember telling him that his grand mistake was this concentrated unity of purpose. He was really richer in impulse, imagination, sympathy, and varied power than he knew himself to be or allowed himself to be."

II. The second element of greatness is ACTION.

The active element in Theodore Parker was very predominant. It went always abreast, at least, with the specu-

lative. He studied and speculated in order to act. He was a worker in the world; here to do something, not merely to think something. Hence his interest in all reforms, in all social progress, in all that tends to deepen and heighten human culture. Before him his life lay planned out like a chart, and his work was arranged beforehand for every year. Indeed, his intense activity, as I just said, seemed often to weaken or repress his intellectual power; for thought needs a resting-time to ripen. Too constant action impairs the sweep and strength of the intellect. Especially is the imagination, that airy faculty, cramped by too energetic a will. It can only spread its wings when allowed perfect liberty and choice of its own time.

But what an amount of work did our brother do, with *tongue as a speaker*, with *pen as a writer*, with *hand as a helper*. First, as PREACHER AND LECTURER, he stood unrivalled in the rare gift of making popular and interesting to thousands the results of systematic philosophy and theology. Before a crowd collected to be entertained by his wit, pointed comments, and sharp criticism on the persons and things around them, he did not avoid an almost scholastic discussion of first principles, a careful analysis of conduct, character, morality, large generalizations, systematic and exhaustive distributions. Hour after hour the great audience would listen, held by the thread of a masterly and clear argument, enlivened, indeed, not infrequently by flashes of wit and touches of poetic description. But, if he entertained and amused them, he did not have amusement for his end, but merely for one of his means. His end was to revolutionize public opinion; to beat down, by terrible blows of logic and satire, the cool

defenders of inhuman wrong; to pour floods of fiery invective upon those who opposed themselves to the progress of a great cause; to fill all minds with a sense of responsibility to God for the use of all faculties; to show the needs of suffering man; to call attention to the degraded classes; to raise up those who were bowed down and to break every yoke. He also came in the spirit and power of Elijah. He was ready to denounce the Ahabs and Herods of State Street, the hard money-kings of a commercial city, the false politician whose lying tongue is always waiting to deceive the simple. His fiery indignation at wrong showed itself, in the most terrible invectives which modern literature knows, against the kidnappers, the pro-slavery politicians, the pro-slavery priests, and the slave-catching commissioners. These invectives were sometimes cruel and severe; in the spirit of Moses, David, and John the Baptist rather than in that of Christ. Such extreme severity, whether in Jew or Christian, defeats its own object; for it is felt to be excessive and unjust. I cannot approve of Theodore Parker's severity. I consider it false, because extravagant; unjust, because indiscriminate; unchristian, because relentless and unsympathizing. But, then, I will remember how bitterly he was pursued by his opponents; how Christians offered prayers in their meetings that he might be taken away; how Boston wealth and aristocracy hated and reviled him; how little he had, from any quarter, of sympathy or charity. I cannot wonder at his severity; but I cannot think it wise. Being so great, I wish he had been greater. Being so loving to his friends, I wish he could have felt less bitter scorn toward his opponents.

Together with his work as a preacher he did a great work as a lecturer and platform speaker, and, in addition to this, another great work as writer. Book after book, pamphlet after pamphlet, issued from his busy brain and pen. I think, if anywhere, he failed intellectually here,—in a too great rapidity of production. His early writings are much more rich and full than his later ones. His "Discourse on Religion"—his first printed book—remains his best one. He did not give himself time to go down so deeply as he might, and to meditate as fully as he might, before he printed. But his writings were read by tens of thousands throughout America and Europe. Every one in the land knew him. To the furthest prairies of the West, to the remotest corner of England, his writings have penetrated. They were translated into different European languages. So he did, as Wendell Phillips said the other day, the full work of three men,— first as a preacher, then as a lecturer and platform speaker, and lastly as a writer.

As a preacher, I have already spoke of him in the Music Hall to his old friends and hearers. It is not necessary to repeat here and now what I then said. I will only add that, though I thought, and still think, he was wanting, as a preacher, in the perception and utterance of some of the deepest truths of the gospel, I believe he did an immense good to thousands by his splendid utterances in behalf of right, justice, and good. He denounced wrong as no others denounced it; he appealed to the sense of responsibility as no others; he called upon the religious element in the soul to assert itself against all that is selfish, worldly, and sensual in man. Thousands were roused

by him to see what life was for,—what only makes it really life. It is not necessary for every man to preach every part of the gospel, in order to do good. Having gifts differing according to the grace given us, we are called, in preaching, to preach according to the proportion of our *own* faith.

When Paul preached to Felix, he did not think it necessary to say anything about the doctrine of reconciliation by Christ. He preached "righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come"; and "Felix trembled." No one can deny that Theodore Parker made many a Felix tremble by precisely the same sort of preaching, and I think that the Master will admit that, though not doing all the work to be done in the vineyard, he faithfully and nobly, by the sincere convictions of his soul, did the work which God had given him to do. "Care is taken," says Goethe, "that trees shall not grow up to heaven"; and God does not mean nor require that every man shall do everything. He asks us only to be faithful to our own duty, which is determined by our own insight and conviction.

III. But head and hand alone, without heart, cannot make real greatness. There must be warm devotion to some person or to some cause, there must be love constantly pouring life into the intellect and will, else the intellect freezes into mere formality and the will hardens into mere habit or dead routine.

Theodore Parker's soul was a loving soul. He was born with enthusiasm for the True, the Beautiful, and the Good; and the secret of his power over men was that he was able to retain to the last this enthusiasm. They saw in him one man who, though a great intellect, could yet love and adore, who, though a great practical worker,

could feel tenderly all human woes and wrongs. Therefore, they laid their hearts at his feet, and were willingly led by his genius and commanding thought.

He was a man of intense feeling, a man of tender sympathy, a man who felt as sincerely for the sufferings of a poor laborer or a poor drunkard or a deserted child as he did for the great cause of human progress. The humblest never appealed to his sympathy in vain. How often have I heard of his interest in one or another unfortunate, —some exiled foreigner, some poor widow, some orphan children! His time, though so much utilized and so precious, was at the service of any forlorn vagabond or outcast; and I think that he who said, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me," will prefer this practical obedience to his command, and sympathy with his spirit, to the most orthodox confession which Theodore Parker might have made of the Deity of Christ or of Christ's miraculous power over nature.

The friends whom Parker loved, he loved with his whole heart. He loved them as Jonathan loved David. His love for them was wonderful, passing the love of woman. A word of kindness, an act of good-will, was never forgotten by him. His noble soul opened itself to affection like the blossoming apple-tree to the balmy sunshine in this early June. His sympathy with humanity inspired his flaming and ardent zeal for the oppressed everywhere; and as, in our land, the colored man is the most oppressed of all, therefore he felt most keenly *his* wrongs and labored most zealously for *him*. Cold-hearted and selfish politicians, who think that to obtain office is the only motive

in politics, could not understand this; but they are to be pitied for their forlorn ignorance of the nobilities of the human soul. His whole heart as well as his whole reason and conscience were in the cause of suffering and enslaved man; and for this that noble heart throbbed to the end.

This loving heart, which glowed with such devoted and steadfast love for his friends, which burned with such ardent interest for the sufferers everywhere, could not be, and was not, wanting in the highest type of love. It rose through friendship to humanity, through humanity to piety. Having loved his brother whom he had seen, how could he *not* love also the invisible but ever-present Father of us all? His piety was tender, filial, reverent; devout as that of Pascal, Saint Bernard, or Madame Guyon. It was an instinct of adoration for infinite beauty and perfect love. Those who blamed his irreverent speech toward the outside of religion, toward the letter of the Bible, toward the sacraments of worship, little knew how tender and deep was his reverence toward the Great Father, whom he also loved to call the Mother,—Father and Mother of all men.

And now, after this survey, I must conclude him to have been a really great man, because deficient in none of the elements which constitute greatness. A great intellect was in him directed by a great will toward an aim given by a great heart. The heart of love poured life into his thoughts and actions. His is a name to stand always high in the catalogue of New England worthies; and, as long as Benjamin Franklin is remembered, Theodore Parker will not be forgotten. No monument will be erected to his memory at Mount Auburn or in State Street,—at

least, not in our day; but probably the grandchildren of those who condemned him most bitterly may call on our grandchildren to subscribe for his statue or to take tickets for the centennial celebration of his birthday.

I took for my text the saying of Jesus concerning John the Baptist, in which the Saviour seems to excuse the harshness and rudeness of his precursor on the ground that such a work as he had to do required a man whose faults would lie in that direction. A civil and smooth-spoken man, a man of decencies and proprieties, would not have drawn the multitudes into the wilderness to hear their sins denounced and their wickedness condemned. Nor would such an orator have gathered crowds into the Music Hall. Theodore Parker was the John the Baptist of our day, —the prophet of a transition state, when the law had ended, but the gospel only just begun. He belonged to the period when the kingdom of God is taken by violence. He was not a reed shaken by the wind, nor a man clothed in soft raiment; but he was one of those men whom the times require, and who could not do their work if essentially different from what they are. And as Jesus apologized for John, and excused his harshness, on the ground that such a character was required for such a work, so I doubt not that, if our brother failed in the same way, it was for the same reason; and I think that our Master will make for him the same excuse.

And now he has gone! That brain, filled with the last results and discoveries of the French, English, and German intellect, has gone! We can no more turn into Exeter Place to consult that encyclopædia. That great worker, who could swim steadily abreast of the rising tide of events,

keeping always on its topmost wave, always having his work ready for the hour and for each event of the hour, has gone to sleep under the blue Tuscan sky. His dust mingles with that of the men of many ages,—with the Oscans and Latins, with the Tarquins and old Etruscan chiefs, with the Roman consuls and Roman orators, with Carthaginian invaders from Africa, with Keltic invaders from Gaul, with Cimbri and Greek, with Ostrogoth and Lombard, with mediæval monks and doctors, with the dust of Saint Francis, Dante, Michel Angelo, Petrarch, and Tasso. And, if he may not rest in Santa Croce with the illustrious dead of Florence, neither is Dante there, nor Savonarola. The kindred dust of the great Italian reformer was dispersed in flame on that Cathedral Square near which our brother's remains repose. Let him sleep there after life's fevered task, our New England cosmopolite, in that cosmopolitan society,—in that soil made up of the dust of men of all races, all creeds, and all characters. But we in Boston shall often miss him. When that great Hall shall stand silent and empty, Sunday after Sunday, because no one can be found in our community with ability to keep it filled with the crowds who went to hear him; when plausible pretenders and famous rhetoricians utter their applauded sophisms without contradiction, because our great critic is not here to answer them; when great national crises come and go unanalyzed, because he is not here with his ever-ready brain and well-filled memory to give the immediate judgment which history is afterward to assign,—in such hours as these we shall remember the greatness and mourn the absence of our Boston Socrates,—our gift of God,—our Theodore.